

The Critical Climate

The critical discussion of sleaze or trash documentaries emerges from the confluence of several different streams of investigation. My immediate intellectual debts here are to Eric Schaefer for his careful and detailed history of exploitation film in the U.S. *"Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!": A History of the Exploitation Films, 1991-1959* (Duke, 1999), and his forthcoming history of early commercial porn films, *Massacre of Pleasure: A History of the Sexploitation Film*. In documentary film studies, a variety of works developed in the past few years have addressed restaged, parodic, and fake documentaries, with *Faking It* by Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight marking the most extensive discussion to date. Continuing in this vein in documentary studies, Jane Gaines' work on the "Ripley's Believe It or Not" documentaries of the bizarre and the exceptional is foundational to understanding how they run against the tendency to realism and sobriety. Another trend is the new attention to cult cinema, both with emphasis on validation of perennially popular films, as in Telotte's anthollogy *Cult Films* and detailed consideration of disreputable films and genres

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There is a wide spectrum of reaction to paracinema. On one extreme are those who dismiss it out of hand. While some dismiss all commercial cinema as aesthetic junk, others who are invested in claiming film as an art want to discriminate on a high culttue basis and condemn such work by title, topic, genre, or production standards without viewing it. A more moderate position is the Guilty Pleasures stance, which finds most paracinema to be dreck, but finds some pearls among the swine, based in arare consesneurship or in an admitted personal infatuation with some aspect of the film. Much more invested in the whole enterprize, the Golden Turkey stance involves actually knowing the range of possible texts and then sharply discriminating against those considered worst (and often most laughabale). THE other side of the spectrum ranges from an enthusiastic fandom, encyclopediacly absorbing everyting (actually rare in its pure form) to taking in everything and attempting various degrees of dscrimination: thus the Pscyotronic or Danny Peary's *Cult Films* apprach

By and large repeats the patterns of fan culture, sometimes mixed with specific subcultural stands. Extreme investment in object, fetishistic attention, collection of facts and factoids as all meaningful and qually significant, extreme partisanship, etc.